

## LIFELONG LEARNING CHALLENGES: PROACTIVE, REACTIVE OR INACTIVE?

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### **Abstract**

Lifelong learning transcends age and the narrow confines of the classroom. The advances in technology, globalization, economic advancement and a range of other factors have contributed to the need for lifelong learning. In line with the global trend to provide viable alternatives to conventional educational systems, the Malaysian government has provided impetus for lifelong learning through its Third Outline Perspective Plan, the 8<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan and the 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan. The opportunity to pursue off-campus learning programs paves the way for lifelong learning. The present study focuses on an off-campus program offered by a tertiary-level institution in Malaysia, that is, Universiti Utara Malaysia. 20 students enrolled in UUM's off-campus undergraduate program were interviewed in 2009 and 2010. Participants had completed their first or second semester of study. Interviews regarding students' readiness for self-directed learning indicated that several issues needed to be addressed if more students were expected to successfully complete their programs. While some students coped well with independent learning, a sizeable number of students needed more guidance on strategies that could help with independent learning. Issues that need to be addressed by the university include access to resources, academic guidance, effective study techniques, and meeting deadlines.

### **Background**

Similar to many institutions of higher learning in Malaysia, UUM plays a vital role in offering off-campus programs for non-mainstream students. This is in line with the Malaysian government's efforts to encourage lifelong learning under various plans such as the Third Outline Perspective Plan, 8<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan and 9<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan. UUM established PACE (Centre for Professional and Continuing Education) on 1 April 1999 to develop a knowledgeable community through continuous educational development and management of education. The off-campus unit is one of the major units managed by PACE. The off-campus unit:

- Assists the public in acquiring knowledge through the distance-learning programs which serve as educational alternatives
- Plans and designs programs to be offered in cooperation with the College involved
- Accounts for all matters pertaining to distance –learning students' affairs and academic performances
- Plans futuristic programs that have the attributes of the current market needs using the current technological resources

The programs offered under the off-campus unit are the Bachelor of Business with Administration with Honours, Bachelor of Public Management with Honours and Bachelor of Communication with Honours.

Off-campus education or distance learning contributes to lifelong learning. However, lifelong learning defies a singular definition. In many ways, we are lifelong learners because everyday brings new experiences (Fields, 2000). Lifelong learning is commonly associated with adult education. It is based on the assumption that the student already has an education and is merely continuing on with the learning process.

The situation and context in which the teaching-learning process takes place in a distance education program is rather challenging. Generally, distance education students are older members of the learning community. They are working members with lots of other commitments (Schuemer, 1993). They could also face very challenging situations in their studies. However, unlike the more conventional students, they cannot expect immediate face-to-face interaction with the instructor to discuss issues that act as barriers to their continued engagement with their studies.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative study was conducted in between 1 January 2009 and May 2010. Data was collected from participants who were enrolled in the first or the second semester of the off-campus program offered by Universiti Utara Malaysia. Convenience sampling was used to gather data based on structured and semi-structured questions (Patton, 1990; Sechrest and Sidana, 1995; Wadsworth, 1997). The structured questions gave information on the demographic details of the students. The major research question in this study was guided by one major theme, that is:

- Students' readiness for self-directed learning

The study was based on the voluntary participation of the off-campus students. Only students who were willing to be recorded took part in the study. The findings were organized into themes and sub-themes.

## **Findings**

The interviews with students highlight some of the challenges they face in following the off-campus programs offered by Universiti Utara Malaysia.

### **1. Access to Resources**

Resources in themselves pose problems to some of the students who are following the distance learning program. Some of the students saw their educational learning experiences as an extension of their earlier engagements with learning. The response below is an indicator of the problem faced by mature students who had left school for more than 12 years. One of the responses of the students is given below:

*I am not sure what to do. Do I just stick to the module? I need to look for more material. I am not sure. I depend a lot on the lecturer. Expect him to tell what to do, learn. The assignments; they are very hard at times. Those, the campus students, very lucky. They have a lot of materials, they are in campus. They have their seniors and others. We can always access materials from the computer, but in my place, the connection seems to give trouble when I badly need to beat the deadline. The system works, then it is off. I am still comfortable with the traditional approach where we are told exactly what to do and the material provided. I don't think I have much time to do too much extra reading.*

Similar to the student above, several students commented that they were dependent on the notes and modules given by the lecturers. They felt the need for a comprehensive guide that provided important materials and took them on a step-by-step approach to understanding the content.

Another student who felt that she was having a lot of problems with the program mentioned

*So much to do in such a short time. We must have the necessary material to get them done. One meeting seems to cover so much material, and it is not just one subject we are taking. There is a combination. And before we know, the meeting for one subject is over. There are also certain times of the day when we cannot absorb anything, It is one after another. We need to look up so many books, articles, so that we can understand better, and do a good assignment.*

Students mentioned that at times, they had problems getting the recommended texts as well as relevant articles, especially for their assignments. Some of them had problems with their internet connection. Another much valued resource was assignments done by students previously. This was in no way associated with plagiarism but as a helpful guide that would assist in complying with the guidelines given by the lecturers. They were seen as models that they could emulate

## **2. Student Support Services**

Student support systems were one of the major issues raised by the students. Students felt that they needed more guidance and support to meet the ongoing challenges of following the programs. Most of the off-campus students were working and had family commitments. They need guidance and support from the program providers so that they are better able to cope with the continual challenges they face in a lifelong learning program.

In contrast, on campus students had easier access to their lecturers and could easily seek assistance during consultation hours allocated on a weekly basis for them. The off-campus students found it hard to meet their lecturers for face-to-face consultation. As the name implies, the distance was making things more difficult. Others, too, mentioned that they were not familiar with communication through emails or chatrooms to derive full benefits from this technological advancement. There was a difference between face-to-face question and answer sessions and through mediated technology. Less frequent meeting also implied that it took a longer time for the students to adapt to the teaching styles of the lecturer.

Furthermore, the off-campus students felt that they were at a disadvantage because they found it difficult to form study groups. Quite a number of them felt that it was a different environment in the university and outside the university. There was limited interaction with course mates. Opportunities for brain storming, clarifying ideas, discussing key concepts, problem-solving, and sharing alternative views were limited. Some of the students

### 3. Perceptions On Course

Several students mentioned that at the initial stages, they were very unsure about the demands of the course and how to meet those demands. Initially, students were not familiar with the standards established by the university for successful completion of the course. This includes attendance for classes, types of participation required, the standards expected in assignments, deadlines to be met, the types of support available and any specific periods that would require very intensive engagement with academic work. Two students clearly mentioned that they had the intention of dropping out because they felt alienated from the courses and did not know how to address the challenges they faced. As one student mentioned:

*I don't think I can get along with this style of learning. What can we do with such a short meeting? There must be other ways of teaching that are more suited for the distance learner. Not all of us are comfortable with technology. It's easy to say read this, this and this. But it seems so much. What am I supposed to remember, think about?*

Another issue raised by some of the students was that they could not see the relevance of the courses to real life contexts or seen to be too theoretical. Some of the courses did not engage the students because the content was perceived to be of limited use.

Several students mentioned that their perception of the course could be influenced by the instructors and the way the lessons were delivered. A few instructors were seen to be insensitive towards the needs of adult learners and taught in ways that were more appropriate for those who had just left school. The off-campus students also drew attention to the fact that the way the courses were taught and managed was equally important as the course content itself.

### 4. Additional Findings

Although the interviews were focused on students' readiness for self-directed learning, one of the issues raised by many of the students was on accreditation. Accreditation issues are perhaps issues that seem to find little expression through official channels. Many of the students though, felt that their programs differed from the conventional courses offered in universities. There was a general perception in varying degrees that the more conventional courses commanded more respect from the private sector and the civil service. In comparison with the on-campus programs, the certificate conferred upon completion of a distance learning program was perceived to be of lesser value.

### University's Response

A more proactive stance by the university would be helpful in addressing the challenges faced by the off-campus students. This would encourage more students to benefit from the education programs that are offered.

Students in distance learning programs come from different backgrounds. They could differ in academic qualifications at the entry point of the course, academic training, learning experiences, attitudes, motivation, and the primary reason for pursuing the program. Some groups of students would require more support than others. Students might benefit from sessions on time

management, coping with stress, study techniques, academic writing, motivation and self-directed learning. Students could be guided on these issues.

Students could also be informed about the values, attitudes, and study habits that will help them to be successful in their studies. For example, students could be encouraged to think laterally to find solutions to their problems. If they are not able to depend on the internet connections all the time, what is it they can do to overcome the problem or find alternative solutions?

An orientation program and follow-up programs that address challenges off-campus students face would be helpful to reduce the number of drop outs in the programs. Such meetings could help to motivate students and sustain their interest in the program. Students should also be informed on current developments that would have an impact on their continued success in the program. Students must be made to feel that they are an important part of the university. A sense of alienation would not be helpful for continued engagement in their studies.

Instructors, too, could be informed about the differences in andragogy and pedagogy when approaching adult learners in the distance learning or off-campus programs. The approach in teaching adults with families and working experiences would be different from classes conducted in campus for conventional students.

Distance learning programs need to be planned meticulously so that they cater to the needs of the target groups. Curriculum design, syllabus, instructional methods, course content, and feedback from external academic bodies need to be looked into. Standards must be well established for the courses being offered. Students can be more prepared for learning if they are clear about the standards they need to meet before they can graduate. Planning, implementation, evaluation and reevaluation need to be an ongoing process so that the program is easily aligned to the needs of independent learners. Off-campus programs cannot be poor replicas of existing conventional programs that are being offered by the university. For example, a conventional program in which students meet the lecturers for three hours a week for 14 weeks cannot be equated with one that has far fewer meetings. Courses need to be paced so that students are given a realistic chance to complete their studies

## **Conclusion**

The nation's aspirations to build upon the existing educational system so that non- mainstream students can pursue their education are full of possibilities and challenges. There is a need for innovative support systems, approaches, technologies, delivery systems, and assessments so that more students, especially adult learners, can benefit from the programs.

In conclusion, more studies need to be conducted on distance learners on all aspects of their learning. Such studies will help to identify the needs of the students, support their learning process and provide a richer environment to enhance the learning process. More studies could be continually conducted with a larger sample of students and various research methods. This will help the higher education program providers with opportunities to respond more rapidly to the needs of the students.

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